

The Dingle Maths Project

Brian G. Mc Enery

briangmcenery@gmail.com

Wed. 25 Sept. 2013

I am sitting here in Dingle waiting for a bus to get back to Skibbereen, in order to consult with my Chief Educational Officer, watch the match in my local on Saturday, and say goodbye to the friends I made during my last four years, living in Skibbereen and it's environs. With time to spare I have decided to give an outline of The Dingle Maths Project, from my personal perspective.

The origin of the project dates to the publication of the Leaving Certificate results, on the year before the Beijing Olympics. The headlines from the newspaper, The Irish Times, if I remember, screamed, '5,000 Students Fail Ordinary Level Mathematics.' It was my wife who showed me the article, and I became immediately incensed. As I have mentioned in 'Variational Methods in Computation,' no student ever fails, it is the system which fails. There is a provision in the Irish Constitution where the state guarantees to provide a minimum of intellectual education, and clearly the Educational system, acting as a state agent had clearly failed in this regard. In order to contemplate what to do, and to gain a little bit of down time, I decided to head down to West Kerry, to Ballyferriter. If memory serves me well it was at the time that Cork and Kerry played their first All Ireland Football Final. Rather than watching the match in Tigh Sayers, where I was staying, I decided to go to the Dún an Óir hotel, and watch the match there. Much to my disappointment, the hotel had been turned in to a golf course, and the PRIVATE NO ENTRY sign showed me how far certain areas had departed for the Ireland of a Thousand Welcomes, so cherished by the tourism promoters. Any way, there was a benefit to this as I composed my tune Ferriter's Cove on my whistle.

On returning from my detour, there was a group of American tourists in Tigh Sayers, and they asked could they get a picture taken with me. I assented, and afterwards spoke with one of them about what was occupying my mind. I must have made some impression as one month later I received an e-mail contact from one of the gentlemen, and we began planning what became The Dingle Maths Project. He was a software designer of some thirty years experience and understood the perspective I had on computation. Over the course of the next few months we exchanged many e-mails, and he was willing to return to Ireland to help me establish the project. Also at this time I made contact with two gentlemen from India who were also willing to participate in the project either on-line or in person. I also had many other expressions of interest through Kenneth Williams' Vedic Maths Academy based in the UK. I felt that at last I would be able to fulfil the promise I made to students, in 1998, after meeting with the school's inspectors, that I would assume responsibility for mathematical education in Ireland, as no one else had my level of expertise.

I formulated a proposal and sent it to the office of the Minister for Education. The essential elements of the proposal were that I planned to bring 64 young people, to Dingle, and train them in my methods of computation. The only qualifications were that they had to have been failed by the system. In addition to computation they would develop other skills, including competence in the Irish language, a little bit of music, dancing story telling. There would also be an outdoor pursuits element to the training, mountaineering, canoeing, sea fishing, etc. Very much as I perceive the training for the Hereditary Warriors of Knowledge.

During the course of this development, I discussed my proposal with a professor of history from Queens University, and he commented that this was exactly as some very famous educationalist had established some educational initiative. In order to manage certain aspects of the projects I was also looking for Army help, in the sense of two Army Sergeants, male and female.

The plans were starting to be put in place, but I could not be assured of support from the Department of Education. I had received a project reference number, and I thought that I was making progress. All of this changed on the day that former Minister for Education, Batt O' Keefe traveled to Beijing, for the Olympics. The document I received as an attachment stated that the Department was effectively withdrawing their interest in the project proposal, as they were involved with the development of Project Maths. They wished me well, but were unwilling to endorse my project. The attached document was under a statement warning of dire consequences if it were opened by someone not the intended recipient. I responded immediately by editing the document thereby removing the name of the person who had issued the document, and sent it all over the world, to the hundreds of e-mail addresses I had on my list, saying that this is how little the Department of Education thinks of mathematical education in Ireland. I also sent it back to its originator. A day or so later I received an e-mail from someone higher in the Civil Service admonishing me for what I had done. Again I responded immediately stating that I was a former Military Intelligence officer, had signed the official secrets act, and knew when a communication was obfuscation or should have restricted access. I warned them never to contact me again, and I closed the project immediately.

The reason why I am giving this short summary of The Dingle Maths Project is that the Minister for Education is being wrongly advised on the veracity of Project Maths. This advice is being offered from two sources, the NCCA, and the Education department in University College Cork. Neither of these sources have any real competence in computation, they simply do not have the training or experience which I have. It should be apparent from their decision to firstly bring calculators into the system, and then remove them at least in part, that they are unable to make a correct decision. Another point I will make here, is that, the State Examinations Commission is making a mistake when they design examination questions which can only be resolved, under the current system, using a calculator. Forcing students to use calculators goes against Article 1 of our Constitution.

I am not going to be stopped this time, and I trust that the Minister for Education as an Architect by profession, will comprehend the necessity of a practical approach to mental arithmetic.

ends